Sikwan POV

The forest was quiet, so quiet Sikwan could hear the gurgling of the stream nearby in the underbrush.

Sikwan didn't like quiet; quiet never meant anything good in her experience. There should have been the buzzing of insects, a bird overhead, or Children of Amethyst murmuring to each other. Instead, no sign of life at all.

She stalked through the flowering brambles, on guard for anything. She had been pursuing another quarry this far west of her home, a fierce wolf-man that had eluded her thus far… but something else had caught her attention. Something she feared was far more sinister.

Before long, the silence was broken by the faint, shrill scream of a Child of Amethyst plummeting through the foliage. Flight failed it as branches whipped its small body, uncaring in its rush to escape something just out of sight. Sikwan was too far away to catch the little creature, so she stood back and watched its careening descent.

Was this a sign that what she hunted lay ahead? She tightened her grip on her bow.

Two new noises joined the pained squeaks of the fey thing. The first was the slow, steady march of too many heavy limbs through the bramble, accompanied by a rumble that shook the dew off the pines. It was a cadence that could only belong to a large beast, one that was not concerned nor urgent in its approach. The second was an odd, breathless noise, like a wet hiss.

Sikwan shivered, apprehension cooling the sweat on her skin. She kept waiting to catch a glimpse of some massive shape passing through the trees, either ignorant, or indifferent to the threat she posed. She hoped for ignorant - indifferent was far worse.

Then, there was something. A hint of oil-slick black amid the pine-greens. The beast rumbled, and the nearness of it struck her with sudden fear. She had never doubted her abilities as a hunter. At her age, it was only about proving them… but something about this didn't feel like a hunt, it felt like a dark tableau unfolding, with her as witness.

This doubt intensified when it stepped forward again, an ebony leg jutting out with careful deliberation… and crushed the Child of Amethyst underfoot. This singular, wickedly clawed appendage was about as thick around as a young tree, surprisingly boney for its size, almost equine in form. Sikwan initially assumed the Child could only be dead, but no, as she crept silently forward to find a mark on her target, she saw that the gem at the end of its delicate tail had not been crushed. So long as the gem was whole, the creature still lived, but imagining its suffering made her wish it didn't.

Had that been as deliberate as it had looked? The doubt in her had now congealed to something thick and murky.

Sikwan lifted her bow and pulled the bowstring back, the familiar strain of it disspelling the clouding thoughts that threatened to make her hesitate, let her shot waver. It was fitted with a goose feather arrow she had crafted herself before leaving on this long journey west. She nudged a few leaves aside with the tip of the arrowhead, jaw clenched at the unobstructed sight of the monster now emerging from the shadows.

Its hide was leathery and black as night, possessed of an unearthly sheen. There were six enormous legs in total, lines of shining white spines wrapping around and up to the shoulder. It stood a little under the tallest boughs in this still-maturing forest, far above Sikwan's head. She only got such a good look at its glistening, crimson maw because it stopped to bow its massive head, and pluck the Child of Amethyst up in pointed teeth that alone dwarfed the poor, doomed thing.

That was enough for her, she took aim at its flank just below and a little to the right of the foremost shoulder, hoping for vitals. As she prepared to fire, the beast's deep, fathomless eyes swiveled to her location.

It almost appeared to be smiling, the stench of sulfur and rot accompanying the words it growled next.

"Hunter..."

...and Sikwan let the arrow fly.

Adara POV

The commode in the corner of the room was a dull, old thing, yet the countless details that had been engraved in the walnut wood gave it a nobler air than it deserved.

Adara had been staring at it from the floor for the better part of an hour.

The memory of her and her mother carving flowers, swirling designs, and letters into the surface replayed on loop in her mind. After they'd finished the complex task of embellishing the drawers, her mother had sat back with a smile and told her daughter, "you see, Adara, anything can be beautiful if you're willing to put time and effort into it."

When Adara's mother died, she felt that nothing would be beautiful to her ever again.

The sickness that had taken her was one common to the village. The people were aging and dying, the Iron Hills' mines and foundries abandoned - but the poison already heavy in the lungs of those who had lived and worked in or around them.

As her last living relative in the village, Adara had her mother cremated. It was against tradition, but she'd wanted to be sprinkled throughout the Iron Hills, in order to see the day life finally returned to it.

Adara wasn't sure she held the same sentiment, but if there was one thing she would hold herself to, it was respecting her late mother's sentiments.

Yet, she had no choice but to face her grief every time she looked in a mirror. She was all of her mother, and none of her father. A long, freckled face, high brows, pointed little nose. What their features failed to betray were their twin characters, both bold, take-no-nonsense women... or perhaps, all the boldness had resided with Hester, and now that she was gone her daughter had been left without.

It certainly seemed that way.

Adara got back to her feet and meandered over to the cracked window. The view of the village outside that had once been a familiar and homey sight had lost its luster, just as she had. It was all too clear now how old and decayed the buildings were. There were too many people living here, yet not enough young and healthy to rebuild. No money in it either.

No, everyone that could have left had already left, hadn't they? What did Adara have left to stop her from doing exactly the same?

It was an easier decision than she expected it to be.

Everything she cared about bringing fit into two bags that she carried on either shoulder as she made her slow way down to the one wharf, wrapped in a wool cloak, eye out for the boat she knew traveled to Occitrum's capital twice a day.

She had received a single condolence letter from a distant cousin living in the city. In it, she had offered Adara a maidservant's position in the castle, as she would soon be vacating it to get married. It was an opportunity to be anyone else, anywhere else, and the capital sounded like the perfect place to either make a living, or die unnoticed.

The boat arrived, disembarked (more cargo than people), and she stepped up to the sailor manning it.

He was hesitant about letting a young girl take the journey alone. Did she have a male relative to take her in once she was there? Would he meet her on her arrival? The lies came as easily as her decision to leave had, and soon they were off.

There was one other passenger, an older man with a cargo of fish he hoped to sell for more in the capital than the locals would pay for it. They struck up a light conversation. He'd made the trip several times before and told her it would be at least five hours, sailing conditions willing. She wasn't sure if this was short or long, as far as boat journeys were concerned, but it sounded long to her.

In no time at all, a chill seeped in. Adara tried pulling her cloak more tightly around herself, but it was seemingly to no avail. The wind just bit through her. Perhaps in this frigid little boat she would take ill just as her mother did and pass away after languishing a day or so in the city. The misery of the thought was oddly comforting. She tried to sleep, and a little rest did come to her once she adjusted to the back and forth of the rocking vessel.

Adara awoke when the clouds parted, and the sun burned the mist off the strait. Her extremities were numb with cold, and she could feel every wooden surface she was pressed up against digging into her, but when the radiant sun touched her face she blearily looked up to see a city sprawling before her. It was so much bigger than she'd pictured.

It took a few more minutes for their dingy little boat to finally pull into the docks, and she felt dwarfed by all the vessels around them.

She couldn't wait to get off this accursed thing, but the first step she took off the boat had her falling in a heap from dizziness. The fisherman that had rode with her offered her a hand up, and she did her utmost to accept it with her dignity intact. Never again would she embark on a boat.

Once she had composed herself and dusted her shabby garments, she bid both gentlemen farewell, and departed.

Sera POV

Sera sat on the edge of a porcelain blue lake, dipping her tanned feet into the cool water. Whenever her father would catch her at it, he'd scold her, "foolish girl, you'll catch your death like that."

Nearly every morning saw her hastening down to the lake with him, helping him carry the fishing supplies, grinning with anticipation of the day ahead.

The villagefolk would often narrow their eyes and frown at this. A respectable girl sewed, tidied, cooked, and eventually married and reared children. She did not kill and gut fish for a living. Sera didn't concern herself with them, however. Fishing was the family trade, it's what she'd known since she was a little girl, and she'd keep doing it as long as she could.

She kicked her legs peacefully in the water, the temperature numbing her toes.

Her father was a little ways away, loading the nets into their rowboat. He wasn't watching her, or he would have said something by now. Sera smiled, letting the water calm. Maybe she'd walk up the shore to the copse where the old dock was. It was usually teaming with small fish who liked the shade, as well as the insects that occupied it. She got up and started walking barefoot in that direction.

She pulled a worn little burlap pouch from the rope belt twining around her waist. In it were some morsels of dry salted meat that would soon go bad. With a gaff in one hand, and her bait in the other, Sera crouched down low over the rotting dock.

The fish had been made wary by the creaking of the wood, but she knew all she had to do was drop a few bits of meat in the shallows and wait. She sat there, watching with eyes darker and greener than the woods.

Then, just as predicted, the first couple of minnows swam up. Sera held her breath, would more appear? Could she skewer more than one at once? This was the one thing she could exercise enormous patience for.

Her patience was rewarded with a flash of silver scales. She could tell it was some kind of smelt, slender and almost as long as her forearm. It would be good as bait for a bigger fish… but equally good as a snack.

Sera plunged the gaff in, aiming low, knowing the fish would be closer than it looked - and hit her target. All the others zipped off, startled away from the treats she'd laid out to lure them in. She raised herself up, hoisting her catch into the air and beaming triumphantly.
"Baba!" she called to him, "I got one!"

From this distance, it was hard to see his expression, but he didn't look pleased. In fact, if Sera had to guess, he seemed… afraid? His mouth opened to shout something back, maybe it was meant to be a warning, because next she knew the shadow over her had suddenly darkened.

She whipped around, only fast enough to get a glimpse of the clawed limb hurtling towards her, but not fast enough to react. Pain bloomed in her ribs and spine, the force of the blow throwing her into

the lake. She was engulfed in cold, silty water that threatened to replace all the air she'd just expelled in shock.

Sera's vision went spotty, then dark, as she sunk lower and lower to the bottom of the lake. It was unclear if the blood loss, or lack of oxygen, was what finally pulled her under, but consciousness slipped away from her along with the pain.

She woke up on the grassy bank. Her hair and clothes were soaked, but she no longer felt cold. It took her great effort to stand, and she found herself pressing a hand to her injured side. She took a moment just to blink droplets of water out of her eyelashes, gaze averted, not quite ready to see how bad it was.

Sera took a trembling step forward, eyes darting around until she saw her father, fleeing from the terrible monstrosity that had attacked her.

"Run, baba!" she screamed, panicked. Except it wasn't pursuing him. It turned towards her voice instead, with a snarl. Its eyes, or these yawning, cavernous sockets that passed for eyes, fixed on her. They narrowed darkly, and then it spoke

Sera wasn't sure she'd ever heard anything so hideous before. She had half a mind to cover her ears, but she was frozen in place with terror.
"Foolish…" it rumbled, sounding angered, "I am far too foolish."
Then, after saying these words, it stalked away as though nothing had happened. Sera almost questioned whether any of that had been real, the fog in her mind not helping the sense that reality had turned on its head.

She didn't wait for it to come back, she started back off towards the village at a run, water still running from her hair, down her arms and legs. She made it within sight of the first buildings as her father was approaching the stoop of their family home.

Sera's older sister Mia sat right outside. Her newborn son was cradled in her lap, enjoying the early morning sun. Their father rushed up to her, and Mia stood up with a start at the stricken look on his face, her little boy fussing at the sudden jostling.

He said something quiet and urgent to her, and she wailed, crying out "no!"

Mia's husband emerged from the house at the disturbance, taking the baby that was suddenly thrust into his arms as Mia darted away down the path that lead to the lake, where their father had just returned from. He grabbed her arm in a vice grip, stopping her in her tracks.

Sera jogged up to them, a bit unnerved by her family's behaviour.

"Mia!" she said, breathless, "did baba tell you I got attacked by a beastie? I was so scared, it was huge, and- please don't go down there!" T
hen, her thoughts caught up to her, and she added, "is someone getting a doctor?"

No one responded, it was as if they hadn't even heard her. Sera prepared to repeat herself when Mia succeeded in wrenching her hand free of their father's grasp, and ran straight through Sera.

No, no, no. This wasn't real, that hadn't happened.

"Baba," Sera pleaded, but it was the same. He could not hear a word she said. Whatever had happened down by the lake, she had performed some kind of vanishing act, and her family would never speak to her again.

Erelis POV

The man strutted through the market, wearing a bold cobalt doublet with lace trim, and trousers of fine, marble-white silk. If Erelis could tell at a glance how undeniably wealthy this gentleman was, then every single ratty beggar and thief watching for marks knew the same.

This was why he hated being on guard rotation. It was only a matter of time before the man's coinpurse would be stolen, he might even get mugged for that lovely doublet of his, and then the whole petty affair would become Erelis' responsibility.

He could see how it would all play out in the back of his mind already. The man would approach him, furious and flustered, demanding the thief be apprehended immediately. Erelis would inform him that there was fat chance of catching up to a properly determined thief (not in those words, of course), and that unless he witnessed the crime, or a fight broke out, it wasn't even his job to deal with it (not in those words, either). He would be blamed no matter what he said. It was a tired song and dance.

Erelis longed to test his mettle on the same field as his brother, fighting on the border against a curious new enemy of the kingdom, calling themselves Mildren's Crows. It would be more noble than his lot here, having to explain to the arrogant nobility that wandering around unguarded was a poor choice of activity. Why they couldn't hire personal guard - no, why they couldn't hire someone to make their purchases for them, was beyond Erelis. Oh, how he itched for a real fight.

He was distracted from his reveries of combat by a waft of something that smelled burnt. His nose followed the source until his eyes alighted on a little boy. It was easy to follow the boy's line of sight from there, to the rich man.

He was a scrawny, beat-up looking little kid; clearly already had the genetics for a wiry build even without the signs of malnutrition. His stringy red hair plastered to his head, his eyes burned from within. He breathed in and out, slowly, little puffs of smoke spiraling up with every exhale. Erelis could make out rope scars on his forearms.

"Hey, kid!" Erelis shouted. The boy looked up, shock and guilt etched into his very young face, all but confirming what his intentions had been. Erelis motioned for him to come forth, half expecting him to make a run for it.

Yet, the boy just walked up pliantly, wrists already turned up towards the older boy in uniform. His resigned gaze was fixed solidly on the ground between his elbows. Erelis felt something like nausea rise in him - his pinky finger looked broken.

"What's your name?" Erelis asked. Those burning eyes finally met his, something like uncertainty, or distrust, in them.
"... Caruss," the boy told him.
"Go home, Caruss, I'm in no mood to throw a child in the stocks," Erelis said, flipping him a small, flashing coin. Caruss leapt forward to snatch it, nearly dropping it, before clumsily fumbling it into a now-closed palm. He looked like he might cry.
"I'm sorry, sir," Caruss began to apologise, "I just thought- if I took the fat sir's coins, mama wouldn't

have to go without bread so I could have some. Mama doesn't get hired no more after the other Flamehearts tried to revolt." It was the admission of a child, who didn't yet understand that you couldn't tell everything to a stranger just because they were a little nice.

Caruss tucked the silver into the back of his shoe, and gave Erelis one more mystified look before he turned and darted into a set of alleys that eventually connected the market to the lower-end residential districts.

He'd consider that his crisis averted for the day. Erelis caught the eye of another guard through the visor of their helmets, and began to push his way through the crowds in the direction of the sub-palatial plaza

He thought he may have seen the man with the cobalt doublet leaving in the other direction, purchased trinket in hand. There was no doubt in Erelis' mind that whoever had sold it to him had done so at an extravagant price, far more than the gaudy bauble deserved, but there was no law against a good fleecing, at least none that Erelis cared about.

He patrolled the plaza for an hour or so more, before his boredom and hunger carried him back towards the barracks for an evening meal.

It was crowded, today, it seemed like a large group of soldiers had returned from the border, bringing the injured with them. Men ate, laughed, and bellowed among their comrades, and Erelis could not help but appreciate the atmosphere. They were always a cheerful bunch, whenever anyone came home.

Erelis was still taking it all in, when he noticed his older brother sitting at the end of a table. He hadn't seen Henrikas in weeks. He looked worse than when he'd left, pale, circles under his eyes the colours of bruises, but still, he brightened to see Erelis.

The two were so alike it would be hard to mistake them for anything other than siblings. They were both tall, but not too-tall, with dark blonde hair that fell messily over their foreheads. Although Henrikas' was longer, and his beard was something Erelis had, enviously, been unable to grow yet... bastard.

They were also alike in matters of personality. With their height, and build, they could've been intimidating; but they maintained a friendly reputation, despite Henrikas' propensity for drinking and cursing.

The most striking difference was in their eyes. Henrikas' eyes were hard and angular, a steel-grey that mirrored the swords they carried. Meanwhile, Erelis had once had his eyes described to him as *feminine*. He wasn't sure what it was that made one's eyes feminine, but perhaps they had meant the soft shape of them, or the long eyelashes he had. That, and they were a bronze-brown, not steel.

"Henrikas!" Erelis shouted, elatedly bounding over to his brother's side, "I can't believe how good it is to see you back!"

“Good to see you too, little man,” Henrikas smiled thinly from where he was seated, he was bandaged from his waist to his chest, the skin dark and discoloured around the edges.
“What’s with that?” Erelis gestured towards him, with some concern.

Henrikas groaned, not savouring the reminder of his injury, “one of Mildren’s stuck me with a shadowy black arrow, vanished ‘soon as we tried to remove it. I think they want to get a wizard in to look at it.”

Erelis must have made a face at that, because Henrikas chuckled good-naturedly, and said, “come now, don’t pout, I’ll be alright. How have you been faring out here without me?”
“Fine, mother Hen” Erelis responded, falling swiftly back into his role as younger brother with Henrikas’ most displeasing nickname. He was awarded a tense grimace for his efforts, but it was an expression drained of the energy to tease back.
“Go on and eat, man, don’t you worry about me,” Henrikas said, with a weak pat on his brother’s back. Erelis would oblige him this.

After a hearty meal and some drinks, Erelis ascended to the barrack’s second floor. There was a bed for him here, a flat, ramshackle thing with a straw mattress and a wool blanket. It may have been sparing in luxury, but it was comfortable enough, familiar as it was.

His mind would not settle though. He lay sleepless, eyes closed, mind churning. It could have been seeing his brother so hurt, but there was a feeling of dread that would not leave him. He kept trying.

A sudden crescendo of noise had him darting upright.

His heart was like a pounding warhorse in his chest. No, it hadn’t been a small noise, not the rustling and snores of sleeping men, or the creaking of the building. It sounded like something was trying to take the building *down*.

Crashing, stampeding, a roar like nothing he had ever heard. The soldiers around him were waking too, hastily throwing on gear and drawing weapons. Someone shouted downstairs, and then the shouting devolved into screaming.

He had to go downstairs. He *had to go downstairs*. Henrikas had slept in the infirmary that night, and if something was happening to him-

It was easy to join the throng of men rushing through the stairwell, some clad in nothing but their tunics and undergarments, having grabbed whatever was closest.

The scene on the ground floor was chaos. It was crowded with bodies, and dark, save for the light from a fallen and shattered oil lantern that threatened to catch and burn the whole barracks down. Some of the mess tables had been overturned, and a cold breeze blew in from somewhere. Men that had been on the night watch… men that were recovering in the infirmary but had been determined to fight - lay motionless on the floor, or slumped against the walls, blood painted every which way.

The scent of anxious sweat barely cut through the scent of iron.

And whatever had done this to them was still here, in the mess.

Erelis did not look too long at the enormous… *thing* that had a person he'd likely known pinned against its towering, ink-dark mass, three claws deep in his chest despite the breastplate. Because the way to the infirmary was open.

After a fleeting bout of hesitation, the soldiers he'd come down with charged it, and Erelis charged in the other direction.

He ran in to Henrikas crying out in pain from his cot, but very much still alive. He was clawing desperately at his injured side, mad with agony.
"Henrikas!" Erelis cried, his voice high with panic, "what's happening to you?"

There was an oily blackness seeping through the bandages now, and, stranger still, something that glowed like molten metal began to creep along his skin in response, the two sizzling like water on a hot pan where they met.

"The wound," Henrikas moaned, "it's- it's calling to me- I don't…"

He looked feverish, brow creased, eyes pinched tight in concentration. There was a burning smell so awful, then, that Erelis thought the lantern had caught after all. Except it was coming from the man in the cot. The bandages had all come off, and where it was apparently cooling, there was hard steel in place of flesh.

He seemed to have a moment of lucidity, then, and his eyes snapped up to the doorway.
"Erelis, you have to hide," Henrikas said, urgently.
"What? I'm not going to hide, you-" but he cut him off, putting a steely, red-hot hand on Erelis' own, making him choke down a pained yelp.
"Don't argue with me, I don't care how old you are, you're still just a boy," Henrikas' voice was firmer than he'd had to use in a long time. He got out of the cot, dragging his younger brother with him to the infirmary supply chest.

The supplies were thrown out in great armfuls, making just enough room for Henrikas to throw Erelis bodily into it. He pushed back, trying to get back up, his leg ached from where it'd cracked against the latch. Henrikas held him down. Then, his burst of adrenaline rapidly failing him, used the last of his strength to slam and latch the lid.

He only saw for a brief second, before it closed, the thing that burst into the room, and lunged for his brother.

Gadrill POV

The daily proximity and heat of the forge had, for a long time now, been an obstacle to Gadrill's developing facial hair. The coarse, black stubble he sported was the longest either it or the blacksmith would ever allow him to grow.

The blacksmith treated Gadrill like a son, not because Gadrill thought he was especially likeable or easy on the eyes, but because he foresaw that his talents would be worth a fortune.

In fact, he mused, the only qualities he saw as positive in himself related back to the forge. His hands were thick, square, the perfect shape to hold a hammer. His pale skin did not care for the sunlight, so the dim conditions inside the smithy were fine by him. He had an almost mulish attention to detail, and although that wasn't the only aspect of his life he was stubborn in, that was all that actually mattered.

A stray spark near-missed his eye, drawing his focus back to the task at hand. He was mid-tempering his latest creation, a finely-shaped longsword, custom-made to the specifications delivered to him. He would have said that he knew from the moment the blade was quenched that the final result would be perfect, but he'd be lying, he had known long before that.

It was as he pulled the tempered blade from the fire that the second threat to his focus made itself known, in the form of a voice over his shoulder.

"I say, good work, my boy!" the blacksmith exclaimed, "there is no greater pride and joy to see that one's apprentice has taken to his teachings so well - this will fetch a nice price."

Gadrill fended off an ugly laugh, not wanting to risk a slip up at the last step, but an unkind sense of amusement at the blacksmith's expense welled within him. What the old man thought he had possibly taught Gadrill was beyond him. When his apprentice did not answer, the blacksmith got the message. He walked away, scratching the nape of his neck.

Once Gadrill was alone again, and the cooled blade polished, he could start his work on the handle. He had been provided with a piece of horn, it looked like ram, for the material. He wanted the fit to be perfect on the first try, because he didn't have another horn like it, and he abhorred the thought of either presenting an inexact product or asking for another from his customer. It would just have to be perfect.

Sawing and carving took up a great part of his afternoon, but he eventually felt that the shape was precise, to his standards. As an afterthought, he had the sudden, ego-driven urge to etch his name on the handle, where it would be concealed. The blacksmith had never approved of individual touches like that, which only made him want to do it more. He didn't need to know.

All that was left after that were the easiest parts. He fit the metal guard on first, slid the handle up the tang until it was pressed snugly against the guard, then finished with the pommel, a decorative nut, and peening to fix it all firmly in place. The last touch was a tasteful leather wrap, for the grip, that neatly hid Gadrill's name.

He examined his completed work, and allowed himself a private smile, before swaddling it in fabric and tucking it away. He had other chores to accomplish, in the meantime.

It was perhaps an hour until the front door to the smithy creaked open, a crack of light from the outdoors making it over the sill into the workspace. The blacksmith, hearing the telltale sign of a potential paying customer, mosied over to greet whoever had entered. Their steps thudded loudly, someone in heavy boots, then.

Gadrill pretended not to be interested in their conversation, just out of sight as he was.

“What are you looking for, today, kind sir?” the blacksmith opened, Gadrill could picture, from his time in the man’s company, how he must be rubbing his hands together as he spoke.
“I’m here to pick up a commission - a longsword,” the customer replied in a low grumble.
The confusion in the smith’s voice was evident, “I don’t believe I’ve taken a recent commission for a longsword.”
“Ask your boy,” was the simple response.
“Gadrill?” the smith called for him, then.

Gadrill emerged from the workspace, carrying the carefully wrapped blade he’d finished. One of the blacksmith’s eyebrows was disappearing into his (and it must be said - receding) hairline, but he allowed Gadrill to hand it to the customer.

There was a long silence as the man unwrapped the sword, eyes taking in the shine of the metal, the edge honed to a keen point, the solid construction of the handle. He breathed out slowly in appreciation.

“It’s excellent work, precisely as I requested,” he finally declared, bringing his appraisal to an end. A hefty bag of coins was traded into Gadrill’s possession, now relieved of the sword. The blacksmith did not let *that* slide. He snatched the bag from his hand and emptied it out on the counter, quickly counting up the amount.

“S-seventy five?”, he mumbled, disbelieving.
“That was the agreed-upon price,” Gadrill confirmed.
“You can’t sell work that fine for so cheap, you churlish brat!” the blacksmith’s voice began to raise, his face redenning with anger, a trait Gadrill was loathe to share with him.
“Sure I can,” came the flat reply. That made the blacksmith redden further.
“I am your teacher! This is *my* smithy!” he raged at first, and then his tone turned accusatory, “and I would never have taught you to charge so little - since when did you start taking your own requests?”
“Since I decided I felt like it.”

The smith blustered, his attempts to push Gadrill having been received by an utter lack of compromise, “you can’t make decisions like that all on your own, you’re a- you’re a child! An apprentice!”

The customer, clearly no longer eager to be in the vicinity of what this argument had devolved into, spoke up, “look, if it’s of such concern to you, I am willing to verse you slightly more in payment to

resolve the situation. I must admit I wasn't expecting this level of quality from an apprentice."
Before the blacksmith could speak, Gadrill interjected, "not a chance, I've made better."
The glare he withered for that rebuttal was intense. He refused to cede the point.

The customer shrugged, wordlessly gesturing his farewell with the hand not holding the re-wrapped blade, and took his leave.

Gadrill continued, turning back on his mentor, feeling his cool attitude begin to fray at the seams, "I negotiated the commission myself, he provided the materials he wanted me to use, and then I did all the work. Tell me how that remains any of your business?"
"Because you stand now under the roof of *my* business, do you understand?" the blacksmith snarled, "anything you do here is *my* business."

Gadrill let the annoyance and anger he'd been feeling at this melodrama unspool, glowing incandescent in his gut. He thought, perhaps, that the blacksmith saw the change on his face, because he took a step back.

"Good," Gadrill said, so neutral it could only be from barely-suppressed rage, "so you do remember that I'm bigger than you"

It looked for a second like he might say something in return; but Gadrill could tell he'd won, the older, smaller man was shrinking from this confrontation.

He retreated up the stairs to the smithy's second floor, but he couldn't resist shouting down one last, "you may be a talented smith, but you make a terrible salesman!"
"And you're a decent salesman, but a terrible smith, old man!" Gadrill shouted back.

When no punishment for his threats and disrespect descended upon him, it confirmed his certainty that no matter how unpleasant he was, people would keep him around for his skill in the forge alone. They'd overlook his unkempt, rough looks, his bull-headedness, his spiteful moods, his sharp tongue. All he had to do was keep being good at this - and he was.

The sound of bells rung from down the street, and Gadrill was glad for the excuse to get out of the smithy for a breath of air. A few people had gathered outside the shops to hear the proclamations of the crier, a, diminutive, elfin man in a colourful, over-big coat coming towards them with sheaf of parchment outheld. However small he may have been, his melodious voice belted clearly and loudly enough to cut through the chatter.

"Hear ye! Hear ye!" he began, drawing in attention, "news hath arrived from all parts of Austruvalst of indiscriminate attacks by a beast pulled from thee kindly folks' own nightmares! Nowhere is truly safe - not the far east, in the villages of crystal lakes and small farms, where a young peasant girl hath been killed! Not in bitter cold Ziedaar - nor even the bustling capital of Jurakantas, where an entire barracks hath been slaughtered, leaving naught but two survivors! Be prepared for the worst, good people of Austruvalst, for the beast lurks!"

The reactions of horror and dismay were palpable. Something that could slaughter an entire barracks of soldier in the heart of the kingdom, and roamed free still? It was unthinkable, but the crier had said it was so.

“What of Occitrum?” Gadrill called out, their western neighbour often implicated where matters of Austruvalst were concerned, and vice versa. The crier turned towards him, opening his mouth as if in reply to Gadrill’s question, but then he stopped. A smile worked its way onto his face, like his muscles were fighting to get it there. There was a fog in his eyes that had not been present a moment ago, but they were locked squarely on Gadrill.

The voice that emerged from him next was low, female, and it said, “there you are.”

Where only minutes before, fire had lit him up from within, Gadrill now felt a chill grip his insides with icey claws. He could not form words enough to react. He… it… she… laughed cruelly at his fearful silence.

“Oh, little blacksmith, both Occitrum and Austruvalst will soon fall, but your thread will be severed first. I would run, unless you want to make the chase *too* easy?” she tilted her head, like a question… or a taunt.

Gadrill recoiled, turned on his heels and fled back into the smithy. The rushing in his ears drowned out the sound of the crier dropping to the cobblestones like a puppet with cut strings to gasps from the gathered crowd, and the cry of a woman declaring some seconds later, “he’s fallen unconscious!”

It was as he was gathering all his things, a hammer, tongs, chisel, apron, provisions for the road, the shields he’d earned from the commission, that the blacksmith burst into the room at all the commotion.

“Where do you think you’re going?” he exclaimed, residual heat from their previous argument seeping into his tone.
“I’m getting out of here,” Gadrill told him, without elaboration.
“No, by the god-forsaken oath, you’re not!” the blacksmith now shouldered into Gadrill’s space and tried wresting his travel bag from him. He had failed to perceive the panic that laced the boy’s actions, reason overshadowed by their recent spat.

Gadrill pulled back aggressively, raging, saying whatever he could think of to end this, “face it, old fool, all I ever needed from you was the space and the tools to learn on my own! My lack of experience was the only thing preventing me from hacking it by myself, and now- and now!” he took a shaking breath, flushed from the heat rushing to his cheeks, and clenching his fist at the embarrassment that swept over him in response, “that’s it, goodbye!”

He bolted before he could see the blacksmith blinking back at him in shock. Taking to the streets, where it had begun to rain, with no destination in mind except *not here,* to not wait out whatever was coming.

Rayen POV

Rayen hadn't slept in several days now. He'd been wide awake every night, hunts blurring together. Killing… still no people, he was fairly confident, but whatever else he could catch. Skittish little rabbits, flighty fallow deer, once even a stray cat.

Encountering people was the worst, because it took all his self-control to hold himself back, and that always made the loathing wash over him when he came fully back to his senses. It would be easier, he thought, if he could *sleep*.

The bartender was looking down at him, where he sat propped up against the bar, disapproving. Rayen knew it could be a combination of any three things. He'd been in town for close to a week, which was already longer than he'd normally allow himself - but he'd seemingly lost the huntress that had been on his tail for a while now, granting him a momentary reprieve. However, that still wasn't long enough for the locals to have grown used to his foreign looks.

For one, the townsfolk weren't dark like him, the men didn't keep their hair long like him, their faces were not the same. It drew attention, sometimes positive, but sometimes negative.

The second thing was that Rayen was a mess right now and he knew it. His long hair was tangled, he thought there may have been twigs or leaves in it that he was too tired to pluck out. He was squinting more too, as though it would make the shapes of the people around him less blurred.

The bartender cleared his throat and said, "listen, kid, I think you might be in the wrong establishment. I can't serve you. Where are your parents?"

Ah, Rayen thought, *it's the third thing*.

"I'm old enough to drink," he grumbled, "nineteen years old."

He could already see that the bartender didn't believe him. Rayen felt that was deeply unfair, it was just that he was small, and the people of this kingdom were giants… It was possible that his youthful features were also not helping matters.

"Please, just an ale, I've had a hard day of work," he tried.
"Doing fuckin'… chores?" a drunk man next to him slurred through laughter.
"Chopping wood - for *Mason*," Rayen frowned at the man; but he'd seen the respect Mason had around here, and just hoped that would be enough to pull him through this embarrassing conversation.
"Then Mason can come in and vouch for you," the bartender cut in, nonplussed. That sounded like the end of that, then.

Rayen stood up, and found himself wishing, absurdly, that he were a horse. What he wouldn't give for the ability to stand without expending any energy. As it was, however, staying upright had become another exercise in willpower. He wondered how much of that he had left.

Deprived of an ale, and his nerves tingling with the set of the sun, he slunk back to Mason's cabin. Rayen had met Mason at the general goods store, or, more like Mason had strode right up and asked where he'd come from, and how long he'd be in town, and if he needed anything. Mason'd been kind enough to offer him a job, and a place in his shed to crash, when he admitted he had none. He certainly hadn't received that kind of hospitality everywhere he'd been so far.

Mason didn't need to know he'd barely slept there, in the last few days. He could probably tell just by looking at him.

The benefactor in question stood at the end of the dirt road leading up to the cabin, smoking a pipe contemplatively. Rayen approached him, and at first, he said nothing, just silently held his pipe out for Rayen to take. He took a slow puff, then exhaled. The smoke tasted bitter, but he felt his agitation abate ever so slightly.

Once he'd handed it back, Mason finally spoke, "my wife is likely to go into labour tonight, but she dropped her favourite mirror in the lake earlier, and she's absolutely beside herself over it," he explained, looking up at the cabin.
"You'll have to be with her," Rayen said, softly, "when it's time."
"Of course," Mason agreed, "but I need to be calm first, if I'm to calm her."

They stood quietly outside for another moment. The evening air was growing cool. Rayen would have to take his leave soon, if he wanted to trek far enough into the forest to be alone before nightfall.

"How do you know?" he asked.
"Know what?" Mason replied.
"That Aylin is going into labour tonight."
"Oh," Mason breathed out languidly, "children are usually born on a full moon."

Rayen turned slowly towards the sky, not seeing the moon for the clouds. He felt a very peculiar kind of serenity, like the kind that only comes before abject dread. He had to leave now, there was no more time.

"I'll see you tomorrow," he told Mason, trying not to betray his rush, but already stepping away. The temporary relief the tobacco had afforded was already evaporating, and he didn't want Mason to see him coming unglued.
"Right," Mason said, "come say hello to the babe."

Rayen thought it was very decent of him not to comment when he hurriedly walked off in the direction of the woods, instead of the shed.

His breathing had grown harsher, a few minutes into the darkening wood. His mouth still tasted like smoke. It should have been getting harder to see, in the dim light, but his eyes had adjusted just fine to the minutiae of detail around him. The soft carpeting of leaves, the roots that extended out from under their trees, and snarled across the trails left by animals.

He went to step over a fallen log, and something shifted in his knee with a resounding crack, sending him tumbling to the ground. He bit back a cry at the sharp pang, teeth finding tongue. Now his mouth tasted like smoke and blood. He got up, kept walking.

Nights like this, Rayen couldn't decide what was worse - the pain, or the itching. He scratched absent-mindedly at his forearms, before looking down to see that his- his- he didn't know whether to call them nails or claws anymore - were bloodied. He'd cut gouges into his own skin, where light brown fur was coming up in wispy tufts. It hadn't grown in full and thick yet, but it would. He put his hands down at his sides.

He walked into a clearing. Something else cracked, a joint popped out of place, shooting through his nerves. Rayen peeled away his outer layers, his vest, his undershirt. The night air chilled his exposed skin.

He let himself fall to his knees, buzzing lit up his veins. It felt as though his bones were giving way under his flesh, buckling, snapping, reshaping into something new, they likely were. Each shift seemed more excruciating than the last, the sounds of his anatomy rearranging itself like a sick symphony.

The pressure behind his eyes became too much, and he wasn't sure why he'd been holding back his tears, but they spilled freely now. With that floodgate opened, he could no longer stifle the agonised sounds he was producing, either. Whimpers turned to wails, wailing turned to something like howling. His body was not his own, and he felt it acutely as it changed.

Rayen's conscious self retreated to the boundaries of his awareness.

Smells flooded his senses, and he sniffed the air experimentally. There was blood on the wind - spilled, unspilled. Something alive, nearby. Something dead, farther away. He crouched low, steadying himself into a forward lean with a large paw-hand, too humanlike to be wolf, but too wolflike to be human.

He stalked into thicker vegetation, keeping his head down, ears up to listen for the faintest sound. He followed the trail of the living-thing's scent for perhaps a mile before he approached the site of a sizable burrow. A young male boar lay sleeping inside, nestled within the tangled grass it had used to shelter itself. Catching it unawares, Rayen dug up the entrance, and pounced when it tried to flee, killing it with his teeth. Its dying squeals only making him bite down harder in excitement. The conscious part of him, that did not act on instinct alone, cautiously went along with this. It had

taken some time, but he'd eventually grown more accustomed to his predatory urges… so long as they remained directed at wildlife.

The kill helped towards sating the hunger, but it had always seemed bottomless, and tonight was no exception.

The dead thing, then, he should investigate that next. Or… he *was* very tired. He could always curl up and- no. He couldn't. The moment he relaxed enough to fall asleep, he would be relinquishing too much control. Control he needed over himself.

So, he found himself pursuing the distant smell of carrion.

It was the faint sound of weeping that first raised his hackles, as he neared. Even in his single-minded state, Rayen knew animal carcasses were not usually accompanied by weeping. The source was a small girl, dirtied, sobbing without pausing for air, her hand clutched in that of a man's corpse.

Looking at a human body was very different to looking at fresh-killed prey. The corpse had a waxy palor, more pallid than the tint of fear, blood spilled red on his front and pooled blue in his hands and feet. His eyes were sunken back, hollow like a starved man. You could almost see the outline of his skull, if you focused on it, and Rayen could not look away.

In the back of his mind, he was forming a catalogue of horror, but at the forefront… he was still *hungry*, and with hunger came immediate disgust, and disgust turned to yet another flare of anger he had to choke on.

Stifling that, his gaze returned to the scene before him. The cause of death had probably been the short slash, and then deeper stab, along his midsection. It looked like it had been done hastily, definitely not cleanly, likely not effective enough for it to have been a quick end.

The girl's sniffling quieted, and she peered up at the intruder on her grief.

"Doggy?" she asked, voice tremulous.

With sudden clarity, he imagined himself tearing her apart with his claws, snapping her little neck under the force of his jaws as he bit down and- he recoiled from her, turning to run back into the forest.

"No!" she cried, breath coming in short bursts, "don't go!"

He stopped, guilt warring with anxiety. If he left her here, who knew what would happen to such a young child, lost and alone with whatever had killed that man still out there? Yet, if he stayed… odds were that he was a greater threat than anything she might encounter. The vision of violence refused to leave his head.

Rayen slunk closer, leashing his instincts as tightly as he could. When he had stepped within arm's length of her, but still outside of her's, she reached out, grasping for him with the hand not clasping

the man's. He wasn't sure how she wanted him to react, so he froze. She made another, more insistent grabby motion.

He could feel his blood thrumming - singing with the desire to hurt the child reaching for him. He drew the leash even tighter, and bowed his head into her space. She seized a large handful of his fur, running her fingers through it soothingly.

"My baba-" she started, and he could see her lower lip wobble, "he won't wake up. There was a- a bad man. I want to go home." She was trying to put on a brave face, but Rayen had seen enough children cry to know the signs it was coming.

He tried to nudge the girl upwards, but she wouldn't go. She just pet his nose, confused. It was clear she didn't understand what he wanted her to do, just as he hadn't understood why she had reached for him.

Speaking was difficult for Rayen. This form *was* blessed with speech, as man was, but whatever it was that made him both wolf *and* man struggled to use that innate gift.

"Follow..." he growled, the sound came from somewhere deep inside of him, and found itself garbled by the ill-suited shape of his muzzle on the way out, *"follow... me."*

Her dark brown eyes widened, glossy with unshed tears, "is- is baba not coming?"

Rayen only shook his large head no, then nudged her again.

The girl went to get up, tried to let go of her baba's hand, but remained stuck. She pulled away harder, and the fingers curled around hers would not give.

That was when the torrent broke loose. She wailed and shrieked, tugged at her hand uselessly, babbled that he didn't want her to go without him, worked herself up so badly that her breathing had become uneven again and snot dripped from her nose.

Rayen closed his claws over the stiff, dead fingers, and pulled them loose. There was a cracking sound. He hoped she hadn't heard it over her own wailing.

It wasn't hard to pull her along after that, and after a while she no longer needed pulling, clutching to his fur as she walked, quiet. Retracing the way he'd come from town wasn't any more complicated. They even passed the remains of the devoured boar. The little girl looked away from it.

Closer to town, there were shouts, and fire-lights dancing through the trees.

"Cankut! ... Berna!" someone shouted, joined by an echoed chorus of voices.

"Berna - that's me!" the girl, Berna, said, as though she couldn't believe it.

Rayen tried to usher her forward. He'd done his part, had led the girl back to people who would keep her safe, bring her home. He had kept himself leashed. She noticed immediately when he slowed down, and turned to regard him quizzically.

A torch entered his field of vision, a dark-haired woman with her long skirts hitched up and muddy boots holding it like a beacon. Her grim expression gave way to surprise, first at the sight of Rayen, then Berna. It took her only a second to steel herself.

"Back away from her!" the woman loudly commanded, waving the torch threateningly.

Rayen obeyed. He pulled away, and ducked away into the dark. Before he disappeared, Berna looked between him and the woman, hurt on her face, like she wasn't sure which person had betrayed her most.

"I found her! I found her!" the woman called to the rest of the search party, and now that the monster she had faced off against was gone, he heard her voice shaking.

As for the monster, he intended to stay gone. Rayen fled, the wild energy inside him threatening to burst out of his skin.

For hours, he hunted anything that crossed his path. By the time the black sky had shifted to a dark, muted blue, the woods were deathly quiet. Not a single living, breathing thing still dared linger in the open. His gait slowed, and he found himself at the edge of a large lake.

Wading out, and staring into the depths of the stygian water, he saw himself reflected twofold, and could not recognise either reflection.

Something was eluding him. He couldn't wrap his mind around why there were *two*.

This mystery puzzled him until sunrise. Along with the dawn, the crawling agony returned in flashes, seeing him un-transformed once more into an ordinary man, muzzle shortening into mouth, claws to nails, fur receding. He was small and nude again, kneeling chest deep in chilly water, spittle dribbling down his chin from another bout of screaming.

The sound of a footstep on rocky ground made Rayen's head swivel rapidly to look behind him. To his horror, it was a man he knew.

"Rayen…?" Mason asked, concern heavy.

When Rayen couldn't think of a way to respond, Mason kept talking, "by the oath, boy, when that woman spoke of a wolf-man that led little Berna out of the woods… so it *was* you."

The words were barely registering. Rayen stood abruptly, he had to check himself over for signs of violence. He had to be sure he hadn't killed someone this night, or he shouldn't even be speaking to Mason.

His mouth and teeth felt normal under his fingers, and there was nothing out of the ordinary about the gamey smell. Legs and arms… intact. No one had tried to hack one off.

It was when he checked under his nails that he noticed the blood. There was *blood* under his *nails*. He remembered seeing the body of a man, a slash across his cold, dead chest. Had that been him? Had he killed a man? He had, he'd killed Berna's father.

Rayen broke down into hiccuping sobs, clutching his hands close, so tight it hurt.

"I killed him, I killed that man in the woods," he confessed through tears, "I can never be forgiven. You should put me down now, before I hurt someone else."

"Blight-" Mason grumbled, "just… hold on. Now, that doesn't make a whisper of sense. We already asked Berna to describe the attacker, and he didn't sound anything like you."

"It *was* me, there's blood under my nails…!" Rayen insisted.

He had his back turned, so he couldn't see what kind of expression Mason was making when he replied "… is that all?"
Rayen stopped sobbing for a second out of confusion, "what?" he sniffed.
With a barely-audible sigh, Mason asked, "could I take a look at your hands?"
"I've got no clothes on," Rayen said weakly.

Besides, a dark voice in his muttered, *he shouldn't want to approach a murderer, shouldn't want to look at or touch a murderer.*

"We're both men, aren't we?" Mason argued, unwaveringly reasonable. Met only with silence, Rayen heard him start walking forward again, the rustling of his long overcoat being removed, then splashes as the taller man waded out into the lake. He felt the heavy fabric hit the top of his head and shoulders. Rayen could swim in this coat. He pulled it around himself.

"Right hand," Mason instructed. Something about his tone made Rayen want to comply with the request, so he clutched the coat tighter in his left and held his right arm out to the side. He let Mason examine his hand, the blood staining the nails, then repeat the process on the left side. After this once-over, a rough, callused grip closed around his forearm.

"Rayen, you've scratched yourself, look."

His eyes were drawn to where Mason had grabbed him, where five barely scabbed-over scratches were etched into the skin. He held his own hand up to the scratches, and found the shape and size matched.

"Listen, we think it was an attempt at banditry gone wrong. Cankut's knife, what paltry few shields, and the mushrooms he'd gathered were missing when we found him. You haven't killed a man. Now will you get out of this blighted cold lake?"

Rayen began shuffling back to shore, numb. The fear had left him in one fell swoop, and exhaustion had come to replace it. Except, there was a recent memory pinging in his brain. Hadn't he been looking at *two* reflections in the water when he'd transformed back?

"Wait," he said, and before Mason could interject, reached down into the water where he'd been standing a second before, and came back up with a cracked hand mirror.

"That's… Aylin's mirror," Mason's eyes widened when he saw it, "how did you…?" Then he shook his head sadly, as if the answer didn't matter. "The bad luck she foresaw came to pass after all. Cankut was her cousin."
"I'm sorry," Rayen still felt like he was choking on the words, "…is the baby okay?"
"Yeah, we've named her Duru, she's healthy as can be."
"I'm glad."

Rayen handed the mirror to Mason, who tucked it into his vest solemnly. The pair of them walked the rest of the way back to dry land together, Rayen shivering uncontrollably the whole time. He almost missed the fur.

"This likely isn't what you want to hear, but I think you ought to leave," Mason ventured, "folks are going to be a whole lot more wary of outsiders after this, and seeing as you're keeping such a large secret…"

"I understand," Rayen conceded, found himself hesitating to ask, "do you think I could get my spare clothes from the shed?"

"Yes, of course."